

Discussion

Recipe for Defeat

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Sam Aaronovitch, in 'Recipe for Defeat' (*Marxism Today*, April 1982), offers an analysis of the current situation of the Labour Left, and the weaknesses which may inhibit and even prevent future advances. As two Labour Left activists we find ourselves in substantial agreement with the broad distinctions which he makes between various left strategies, with the critique that he launches of the strategic perspectives which have tended to dominate the recent campaigns for party democracy and the Deputy Leadership, and with his advocacy of an alternative strategy which shifts the emphasis of Labour Left politics from internal leadership struggles to outward-looking mass political work.

This shift of emphasis is the main subject of a new Labour Coordinating Committee pamphlet, to which we are the principal contributors, *Labour and Mass Politics: Rethinking our Strategy*.¹ We believe that such a shift has rather more support, both explicit and implicit, within the ranks of the Labour Party than Aaronovitch implies, but needs more detailed elaboration than he was able to provide in his article. It is on these two aspects that we wish to concentrate attention.

Aaronovitch identified four competing 'strategic conceptions'. Of these the second and third, put briefly, argue for the establishment of a 'thorough-going socialist party' organised to 'pursue the socialist transformation of Britain', with winning the leadership battle as 'the crucial issue' and for the need to transform the Labour Party into a revolutionary vanguard party. These con-

ceptions share the view that a socialist programme would 'meet with a massive response from the voters' and that only media smokescreens are preventing an almost autonomous shift of mass opinion to a determinedly radical Labour Party. This view, we agree with Aaronovitch, is subject to the quite fundamental objection that it fails to grasp the reality of popular consciousness in Britain today. We would add that the reality of electoral defeat, most recently at Hillhead, is making this point more effectively than any rhetoric.

Labour Right

Supporters of Aaronovitch's 'first strategic conception', those who argue for the *status quo* and regard even limited constitutional reforms as unwelcome, must, we agree, take the major responsibility for Labour's current weaknesses. However we do feel that the course of constitutional history cannot be reversed and that almost everyone now accepts the reality that an irreversible change has taken place.

But the Labour Right *is* in a good position at the moment to tap the vast reservoir of weariness with internal battles which undoubtedly exists amongst grass roots party activists, and to use this as a basis to win policy changes. In these circumstances, there is a danger in the assumption that the main policy matters on which the Left has won the votes in recent years are irrevocably settled. Rather, the first task of the Left is to consolidate these victories by taking a much more active and articulate lead in elaborating and campaigning in support of it. To

this end across broad areas of policy and party organisation where the Left is in effective control (for example on the NEC, until recently unequivocally Left-dominated), it needs to start to acting *as* the party and to shake off the oppositional and factional habits of its own beleaguered past.

In his analysis of the 'fourth strategic conception', we believe Aaronovitch understates the growing recognition of the prolonged nature of the process of change on which the Left has embarked. Advocacy of a turn to mass politics is not, as Aaronovitch implies, confined to 'Peter Hain and others' — implicitly a small group of individuals — with the Communist Party on the outside. While not in any way denying the continuing dominance of leadership-oriented politics, or devaluing the major contribution which Peter Hain has indeed made, we believe that too bleak a picture is painted. Several organised tendencies — Clause 4, Independent Labour Publications, and Chartist — have, from different starting points, arrived at a sceptical view of the traditional assumption on the Labour Left that socialist resolutions plus accountable leadership constitute a sufficient strategy for socialism. Perhaps more significantly, many Labour activists outside these small groups are looking for a more strategic approach to left advance and the Labour Coordinating Committee, though itself a quite broad alliance, is increasingly giving body and coherence to this range of opinion.

Thus current debates on the Labour Left are not simply, as Aaronovitch suggests, between Trotskyists and a disorganised 'broad left' — there is also a serious strategic debate within the 'broad left'. In this debate the Communist Party, on the outside, is unable to have more than a tangential impact and its electoral strategy limits this potential influence still further.

Future tasks

Turning now to the tasks which Aaronovitch defines for the development of the 'mass politics' approach, we want to build on the points he makes and to add an extra one.

His first proposal is that the Left should 'develop its struggle for leadership within the party'. This idea needs to be carefully clarified. We believe that a new campaign for Leader or Deputy Leader would be a tactical disaster for the Left, pushing much of the party's centre ground towards the right and leaving the Left isolated. As we have argued earlier, 'leadership' needs to be defined much more in terms of policy and strategy, and less in terms of individual contests.

The second proposal is to extend co-operation between the Left in the party and the unions. We agree that it would be quite wrong to attempt to 'dismantle the transmission mechanism' between the party and the unions, but we do believe that the *organisational* relationship with the party's 'six million members' is often misconceived as a genuine *political* relationship, thus contributing to the over-optimistic view of popular consciousness discussed earlier. No better illustration could be sought than the union voting in the Deputy Leadership election. The priority must be for the party to develop a more active and campaigning relationship with the unions at all levels. The establishment of Labour Party workplace branches will be a major development here.

We regard Aaronovitch's third objective, the development by Labour of mass campaigning, as absolutely crucial. Many of the ingredients of this are fairly obvious, and nationally some progress has been made in the mass demonstrations and weeks of action of the last two years. But the campaigning approach is still very far from being ingrained in the life of the party, particularly at local level. This is the major theme of our pamphlet, and we elaborate fully there the need, identified by Aaronovitch to respect the autonomy of popular movements and

end 'Labour chauvinism' in campaigning activity.

The use of office

We would, however, add one major point to Aaronovitch's account. This is the way in which, both nationally and locally, the authority of electoral office can be used by the Labour Party. This is a distinctive contribution of the Labour Party, and there is more to be learnt from the failures of past Labour administrations than some iron law of 'betrayal'. That the exercise of government power is not as easy as is sometimes claimed is given greater point by the contemporary difficulties of the new French government, which some immediately lauded as the model for a future Left Labour government.

There are a number of initiatives which can be taken at the level of local government. First, at the level of pure propaganda, as for example the 'Save ILEA' campaign, the Sheffield fares campaign, or the 'nuclear-free zones' initiative, the local authority can become, as it needs to be, the popular expression of local opinion. But secondly, and more important, the Labour Party has to seek to change the ways in which its policies are implemented — to develop genuine democratic participation. Traditional state

paternalism has to be ended and more direct power and control given to the consumers of services, whether as tenants or parents through the wide variety of local community organisations. Alliances must in practice be built with sections of the community sometimes effectively excluded from real influence, most notably the ethnic minorities. These are changes which Labour can be implementing now, and are positive ways of building up the mass involvement which will be necessary if a Labour government is to be re-elected, let alone have the ability to implement left policies.

Similarly the Alternative Economic Strategy must concentrate far more upon the development of workplace organisation and regional and local initiatives, as a counterweight to the exercise of centralised government power.

These ideas for developing a 'mass politics' approach are confronting a long history of traditional organisation, sectarian dogma and outmoded practice. Aaronovitch is right to stress that the Left faces crucial problems. In our judgement the 'mass politics' approach, though beginning to gain support, must be taken much further if these problems are to be tackled successfully. D

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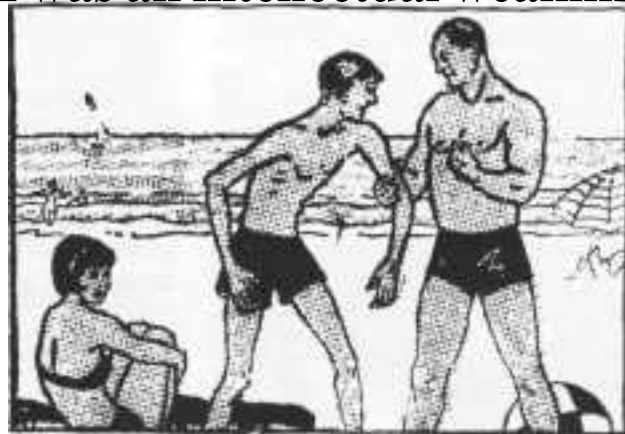
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